

ANZCA DISCUSSION PAPER – FORMALISING THE MEMBERSHIP OF SESSIONAL ACADEMICS

The employment situation for academics in Australia and New Zealand has changed significantly over the last two decades. The days of full-time ongoing positions as the norm for academics are fast disappearing. Many of those teaching and researching into universities are now working on short fixed-term contracts or as casual staff. These academics are variously referred to, or refer to themselves, as casuals, sessionals, para-academics or members of the precariat or the peripherte with all the significance that last term implies. As the current President of the NTEU Jeannie Rea claims, precarious work has now been normalised in our university system (2016, p.3).

Of course, we are not the only occupation these changes are happening to; it is a trend that appears to be accelerating in many industries along with an increased rate of technological change and the cementing of neoliberalism as a default political ideology. For many employers it is desirable for labour markets to be freed of institutional constraints and there is an increasing recognition that an entrepreneurial spirit is necessary in order to innovate (Harvey 2007). In this regard Frey and Osborne (2013) point to a significant structural shift in the labour market, for them attributable to computerisation, while Deloitte (2012) indicate that many industries, including higher education, in the Australian setting are now susceptible to what they call big bang disruption. As David Autor (2015) indicates, technological change is not necessarily employment increasing and the desire to automate on many organisations' part has been most often coupled with the desire to decrease costs. While the 'impact of productivity gains on employment will vary across occupations and industries' (Frey & Osborne 2013 p. 44) it is a simple conclusion to draw that the costs of employing someone on a full time basis are not incurred when one employs casuals. As a recent report indicated 'contingent employees – who receive few benefits and no security of employment – are generally considered a cheap alternative to continuing employees' (Natalier et al. 2016, online).

Studies such as those undertaken by the NTEU in Australia and the TEU in New Zealand, confirm these shifting trends in the university sector. For the NTEU 'Sixty four percent of the total number of staff working in universities are employed on an insecure basis [and] casual employment has risen by around 94 percent since 1996' (Evans, 2016, p. 18). The TEU states that 'A survey of nearly 2000 TEU members shows insecure work, casual and fixed-term employment agreements are widespread in tertiary education...Eighty-seven percent of those surveyed in insecure work want permanent employment and the rights that come with it' (TEU 2013 online). What is important to remember is that many 'casually employed academics try and keep up in their disciplines so they not only retain casual re-employment, but they hope to set themselves up for more secure positions. They do their scholarly reading and writing in their own time at their own expense. They try to undertake research, again in their own time and own expense' (Rea 2016, p. 3).

This large body of academics has begun to be increasingly formalised inside the system. For example, the University of Newcastle in Australia has established The UON Academy (Crawford & Germov 2015) which 'aims to engage, support and recognise the key role that sessional academic staff play' (UON 2017). This institutional adaptation recognizes 'how central our sessional workforce is to the functioning of the university' (ibid). The

establishment of this academy is an attempt to provide 'systematic support for this cohort' (ibid) which ranges from access to library facilities, email and a 'learning and development portal that provides access to a range of blended learning opportunities for staff' (UON 2017a). There is no research funding available to sessional staff at the institutional level.

In a similar manner to this institutional recognition the NTEU in Australia and the TEU in New Zealand have had to formally recognise that casuals are now a constituent part of the academic community they represent. These unions began advocating for them a number of years ago. It had become a pragmatic necessity once this large and growing category of professional academics became embedded in the university system.

Some academic associations such as The Australian Sociological Association (TASA) have been working to bring the issues faced by the precariat to the fore. TASA put together a Working Document examining the nature of contingent labour and a special issue of *Nexus* was dedicated to discussion around this document. The editor stated that 'the exponential growth in short-term, part-time and casualised forms of employment has been a feature of neoliberal, post-industrial economies. Otherwise known as contingent or precarious labour, this form of work is now standard in Australian universities, where its effects on staff, would-be staff and students is profound' (Clark 2017, online). One contributor described the 'personal effects of precarious employment, leading to lives that are unsettled both financially and emotionally' (ibid). There is sufficient anecdotal material to support this claim along with more quantitative studies such as those conducted by May, Strachan & Peetz (2013). The TASA report itself was released at their 2016 Conference. In essence the desire is for those who are employed on a full time and permanent basis to work at an advocacy level for change while, in line with the CASA organisation (CASA 2017, online), 'also implementing practices that can improve the day-to-day working lives of contingent staff' (Clark 2017, online).

As an association of academics ANZCA hasn't as yet acted in any sustained way on the above intelligence. There are many members of the precariat who would become members of ANZCA if their particular circumstances were taken account of. Just as we, as an organisation, recognize and support the particular position and circumstances of postgraduate students, which we know are not equivalent to the position and circumstances of those employed in full time ongoing positions, ANZCA could offer our fellow academics from the precariat similar opportunities to become members. This formal inclusion, which would require an amendment to our constitution, would not only aid them in their attempts to keep up professionally but also bring a fresh set of research insights into ANZCA.

These potential members constitute a large cohort of academics I believe we should encourage to become fully active in our association. They will become valuable and willing members if we make things easier for them.

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